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America and the World

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Hemingway observes somewhere that there are two kinds of writers: those who have something to say and those who have to say something. Ten columns will have given you some grounds to make your own judgments by now about the use this space is put to every Friday, and it is perhaps a good moment to pause to consider where we have been and where we go from here.

Certainly the junior senator from Utah thinks it is about time I explained myself. But before we get to that, some guideposts are in order for this weekly examination of the American presence in the world in the closing years of the American Century.

It is in the nature of journalism that newspapers give more attention to problems and challenges than to the things that go right. This column will not break that mold. But I bring out of 20 years of reporting, writing and editing news about foreign affairs enough restless optimism about America's role in the world, about the impact of American dynamism and decency on other societies, to believe that our nation is, and should continue to be, the greatest force for positive change in the world.

Disappointments and disasters abroad in recent years, ranging from Vietnam to Japan's continuing conquest of American markets, have made it seem to many that the end of the American Century arrived a decade or two early. A renewed distrust of the foreign entanglements that George Washington warned about seemed to surface in a new sense of jingoism. And in Europe, particularly after the Reykjavik summit, there has been much talk of "The Widening Atlantic."

Unilateralism is neither in our interest nor in our destiny, even if we are at times tempted to believe that such an option exists. In many senses, the Atlantic and Pacific are actually shrinking as language and cultural barriers are toppled by the youth of Europe and Asia seeking to emulate Young America.

Financially, big European and Japanese companies are aggressively buying their way into the American market and tightly knitting our economies together. And the continuing trade deficit crisis underlines that America must increase its economic role outward and export its way out of the crisis rather than seeking protectionist solutions.

In a week when particularly glaring flaws in the making of foreign policy in Washington are dominating the headlines, we should also think of the long view, of the international environment created by American diplomatic and military policies that stimulated the reconstruction of Europe and Japan, the decolonization of much of the Third World and an uneasy but enduring global balance of power with the Soviet Union.

Those are the underpinnings of the views that will be hawked here each week on America's role in the world. On a more practical note, a neophyte columnist quickly learns two things about the craft: 1. You have to say exactly what you mean, no more and no less, and 2. If you mess with Charles Z. Wick, the voluble head of USIA, you'll hear about it.

A steady stream of transatlantic communications from Wick and his aides protesting my Oct. 17 column was capped last Saturday by a letter to the editor from Sen. Orrin G. Hatch, objecting strongly to my criticisms of USIA's Worldnet television programming and to my raising questions about Wick's decision to ask for a meeting with Alexander Yakovlev, the Kremlin's propaganda chief, before the Reykjavik summit began.

I wrote with imprecision on both scores. I overstated the sheltering of U.S. officials by Worldnet and hereby sample a wing of crow for dinner for that. And my overstatement obscured the more vital concern that the $20 million to $25 million Worldnet costs each year could better be used by a secretary of state who complains that he does not have enough funds to protect his diplomats abroad.

On the meeting itself, I also muffled the key point, to wit:

There are certain U.S. officials who have no business sitting down with their Soviet counterparts. The head of the CIA could not pretend to exchange notes with his opposite number at the KGB without creating damaging confusion in his own organization. In the same way, the head of the USIA diminishes that agency's proud history of independence and professionalism by meeting with the chief of the Central Committee's propaganda department.

This is not to suggest that I intend to add to Hemingway's categories by being a writer who has to say something twice. Let us start up the face of this mountain again, with an ever greater devotion to lucidity.